

MARINES INSPIRE HOPE, IMAGINATION IN VISITING ORPHANS

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By CPL. ROMAN B. BERCOT

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION EL TORO, Calif. (Aug 19) -- In addition to all the hard work Marines put into making the first MCAS Miramar Air Show a success, they put forth some extra effort to bring smiles to the faces of the orphans of Casa Hogar de los Ninos near Tijuana, Mexico, by taking them to see some of America's finest in action.

Casa Hogar de los Ninos was founded by Americans Tony and Pilar Ralphs and operates through the charitable contributions of several church and civic organizations. It was through one such organization that Maj. David Marvin, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing adjutant and organizer of the excursion, first became involved with the orphanage.

"My wife and I became associated with the orphanage through her church group," said Maj. Marvin. "The children come up from Mexico on occasion to events like San Diego Padres baseball games sponsored by civic-minded organizations."

While preparing for the Miramar air show, Maj. Marvin got an idea about something special he could do for the kids. "I couldn't think of a more unique or awesome experience for these kids than coming to the air show," said Maj. Marvin.

Maj. Marvin worked with the appropriate organizations to make arrangements to get the children to Miramar and sent out a call for Marines to help. An e-mail message soliciting Spanish-speaking volunteers generated interest from several Marines.

"Every time they saw a blue plane they'd ask, 'Is that a Blue Angel?'" said Lance Cpl. Cynthia Martinez, a volunteer from Marine Wing Headquarters Squadron 3. "They were so excited -- just to see something different than their everyday world."

Another volunteer, Cpl. Kimberly Wilkey, believes that break from the ordinary makes a world of difference. "Children need experiences that are larger than life," said Cpl. Wilkey. "Climbing on the tanks and planes and seeing the jets, the Marine Air Ground Task force, the crowds -- it develops imagination and helps them see there is more to life than their neighborhood in Mexico."

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Major Marvin understands the children's need for broaden horizons. "Every one of these kids comes with a tragic tale to tell," said Maj. Marvin. "But this gave them at least one day to get away from the orphanage, get away from Tijuana, get away from it all and enjoy the blessings we sometimes take for granted."

After a long day of touring the exhibits, watching demonstrations, and asking questions about everything under the sun, the children of Casa Hogar de los Ninos climbed aboard the buses and headed back for the border. Like their Marine escorts, they were exhausted but happy.

"We ended up carrying the little ones around a lot, and they got kind of attached," said Lance Cpl. Martinez. "But I'd do it again, even though it was hard."

"The best part was that there were surprises all the time," said Cpl. Wilkey. "Some of the kids just jumped into my arms, having total trust in me. You can't put a price tag on that feeling."

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